WHILE IT RAINED

Continued from page 9

face with the eyes of a beggar; but the response he had hoped for was not there.

"I—I don't know," she faltered. "I guess we've had our time, John."

And then he knew she would never understand; knew too that she was not the kind of wife to whom a man could confide a secret like his. But he tried again. "Remember that time, about twenty years ago, when we sat under the trees—the same old trees, Muriel? I was asking you to be my wife. 'Will you marry me?' I said, just as plain and direct like that, without any soft words. We were both of us too tired, I guess, and too poor and lonesome, to dabble with sentiment. I guess we weren't like the others, Muriel, the others who have sat under these old trees since then. We were never young, you know."

"Maybe it was best that way," she consoled. "We always were plainspoken and simple folks. And we've been getting along pretty well—I guess as well as the others. And I am sure I have been a lot happier since I left Worley's office."

BICK NS suddenly became aware that the odor of bay rum he exuded fresh from his Sunday morning shave was contaminating the breath of the lilacs. But the impression was fleeting. His wife was nursing a wound acquired by the youngest Bickins in his efforts to run at top speed round a circular flowerbed and prove that the law of centrifugal force was all bosh.

"If it hadn't been for Worley—" he thought aloud; though he hadn't meant to.

"Worley, yes—" said his wife, and there was bitterness in her voice that startled him.

"What do you know about Worley?" he demanded a little sharply.

"Why, John, he was my employer, you know," she explained meekly. "It was while I worked in his office that I got to know you—don't you remember?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Queer I should have forgotten it." And then, muttering under his breath, all but too low for her to hear, "Scoundrel!"

She forced her arm tenderly under his. "But he can't harm us any more, John."

"Us—harm us?" He gave a little startled gasp. "What do you mean, Muriel? How did he ever harm us?"

"Oh, I am not sure just what I meant, John. I never liked him, you know," this with a weak laugh that something strangled into a groan. But it reassured Bickins.

"I was just thinking," he said, "about poor—poor Jones. You never heard of him, I guess?"

"No, I never heard of him. You are not cold, are you, John? But what are you saying about Jones?"

Bickins, fumbling for words, wondered how she could find it cold; for the air was warm and caressing. Then, "Jones was Worley's partner—I mean one of Worley's partners. Guess you never knew much about Worley's affairs. Well, poor Jones was on the inside sure enough! He meant well enough, did Jones; but he was young and foolish and poor, and there was a girl. They were to be married as soon as he could get a little balance in the bank. And then Worley—"

He glanced at his wife. Her face, tense but unimaginative, showed no trace of keener interest.

"Worley came to Jones and showed him how he could use that bank balance," he continued bitterly. "He whispered a scheme into his ear, whispered it in that smooth, cunning way of his. They were to start a new investment enterprise with Jones as its president. It looked straight enough to Jones, honest fool that he was. Things began to look cheerful. The girl and he had decided on the day. Then—

"You never really knew what a skulking dog Worley was. The concern was a fraud, a barefaced swindle; though Jones didn't know it until it was too late. Then, as he was the nominal head of the concern, he was told he could either refund the investors' money or go to the pen.

"He asked Worley to help him. Worley laughed. Said it was none of his affair. Jones got down and begged him on his knees. Worley smiled that fiendish leer of his. He went to his safe and took out some papers. He held them before Jones' eyes. 'I could send you to the penitentiary with this,' he snarled. 'Why, you are nothing but a common thief, Jones! The best thing you can do is to look up your friends and borrow money to pay off those howlers. When they are paid I'll tear up these papers: not before.'

"I don't know why Jones didn't choke the life out of him. Maybe on account of the girl. His friends helped him. He got a twenty here, a fifty there, and finally the investors were paid.

"Then they were married. She didn't know: doesn't know yet. Jones has been doing pretty well; but every cent he has earned, except a bare living for the wife,—poor, loyal thing!—has gone to repay the friends. His wife thinks he gives her every cent he earns. But never a complaint from her!"

Still the woman was staring into the mist. "But when the friends are paid," she said at last, "Jones' troubles will be over, won't they?"

Bickins laughed bitterly. "There are still the papers in Worley's safe. Worley had promised to return them; but he knows that as long as he keeps them Jones will keep his mouth shut. Jones had incriminated himself pretty badly by obeying orders, and the papers still prove it. In the eyes of the law Jones is a—a thief."

THE woman wound a cloak about her. "Why doesn't he tell his wife?" she asked.

"A man hates to tell his wife he is a thief. And why should he worry her?"

"Oh, I see. But she would be glad, John, and she would be proud to know how he has struggled for years to pay off that debt and give his children a clear name."

"Do you really think so, Muriel?" he asked with nervous intensity.

"I do," she said, her face pale and wan in the gathering dusk.

He bent close to her and took her hand, his voice strangely exultant as he said, "But what about the papers, Muriel, the papers in Worley's safe? Do you think he would be doing right by worrying her about them?"

She looked at him in a bewildered way. "The papers—I thought you knew!"

"Didn't I tell you what a cur he is? Worley means to hold them as a club over Jones for the rest of his life."

"But he won't," said his wife quietly.

"Won't! What do you mean, Muriel?"

"Oh, John, John, I thought you knew—I should have told you—about those papers. Jones needn't worry about them, because they—they are not in—in Worley's safe now."

NOT in Worley's safe any longer!" Of a sudden a quiver ran through his body, the blood pounded fiercely against his temples, and he seized her arm in a convulsive grip.

"No, I—that is, the girl, the girl he was to marry—stole the papers from the safe," continued his wife. "She knew more about Worley's private affairs than most people thought. She stole the papers, and she has kept them ever since. And she has known all about her husband, his sacrifices and his struggles, and—and she has loved him all the more for it. And she would have told him a long time ago, John, if she hadn't thought he believed Worley destroyed the papers."

He sat very still beside her, looking into her worn and pale face and listening to his watch ticking off the seconds in his vest pocket. And as it ticked months and years swung on slow hinges, revealing in a friendlier sunshine the springs that had flown, and flooding in a rich, glad dawn the falls and winters that were coming.

"Muriel, Muriel!" he murmured, eager to fold her in his arms, yet shrinking as one shrinks from an object made sacred by long and weary years of search. "Muriel—and you have borne this with me! The poverty and the fears and the shame and all—borne it with me all these years! And I haven't known it—haven't known *you*, Muriel!"

Raindrops were falling,—fresh, life-giving raindrops such as only spring can shed,—and the old trees above the bench dripped them, one by one, one by one, on the two below. A sleepily moaning wind rustled in the branches, and then the drops fell more copiously. But the two below did not know.

"Look! it's raining! The children, everybody, are gone to the pavilion. Why, John, we are the only ones who have stayed out in the rain!"

He laughed, and it no longer sounded like the cry of one who knows his spring and summer have flown and that fall is near. "And doesn't that prove, Muriel," he said, "that we are still young?"

ISHMAEL

Continued from page 5

then sniffed cautiously at it, the bristles rising at the back of his neck.

The house door was thrown open and a bar of yellow light shot across the yard. Martin Sammis, aroused by the racket, appeared, half dressed, bearing a shotgun, and followed by Robert. In the bright moonlight big Ishmael was plainly visible by the chicken house, his nose to the ground.

"Holy Smoke!" cried Sammis. "It's that black devil. I knew it."

Bringing his gun quickly to his shoulder, he fired; but Ishmael was not there. His quick sense had caught a noise at the other end of the yard, and with incredible speed for so bulky a creature he dashed round the corner just in time to catch sight of a swift, lithe body disappearing in the weeds. There was a deep, growling roar from Ishmael's throat, a tremendous rush, a smothered cry among the burdocks, and then silence.

Martin Sammis came up on a run, and would have fired his other barrel at the first movement his eye caught; but Robert was ahead of him.

"Don't shoot, Dad!" he cried. "There's something else." What, he did not know; but his sharp eyes had seen something beside Ishmael, and that something was not a hen.

As the man and boy approached Ishmael lifted his head and stood his ground. Something had been awakened in his shaggy breast that, for the moment at least, drove all fear from him.

"You thieving, useless cur, I've got you now!" roared the man, eager for the final shot; but still Robert blocked his way.

"No, Dad, no!" he cried. "See here! It isn't a hen at all. It's a—oh, Dad, what is it?" He stood wondering above the body of the strange little animal, his hand resting unconsciously on Ishmael's shoulder.

Wondering why Ishmael neither ran nor showed fight, Martin Sammis joined his son and looked. Ishmael was wondering too,—wondering what he had done to provoke this latest torrent of wrath, wondering why the blow did not fall, wondering, with all the power of his pathetic dog's eyes, why the little man kept his hand so comfortingly upon him.

Martin Sammis lifted up the dead mink by its tail. "Well, I'll be darned!" said he. "I never saw one of these things before. I don't know what it is; but I guess it's *it* all right."

"Spent his life at the end of a chain, and reputed to be dangerous."

"Dad!" said Robert meekly.

His father was contemplating the remains of Putorius in silence.

"You see Ishmael didn't kill the chickens."

"Ishmael? What's Ishmael?"

"This is Ishmael," said Robert, a sort of fatherly pride crowding up into his throat. "Mayn't I keep him—now—Dad?"

Martin Sammis glanced at the pair. Ishmael was sitting on his haunches, contemplating the face of Robert with that worshipful look that only dog lovers can know or believe in.

"Well," said he, "tie him out here by the chicken house. He may keep other dogs away," and he turned back to the house with his mysterious little carcass, thinking of the tall story he would have for his neighbors, and not noticing the boyish arms that were thrown impulsively about the great dog's neck, nor the curly head buried in the shaggy coat, sobbing silently.